

A. Tell me a story!

Stories fascinate us all our lives. As children, we loved to be told fairy tales and to hear, time after time, the tales our parents told us about what we did and said when we were babies, as well as the stories about their own childhoods. As soon as we were old enough, we told stories about ourselves for our parents and for our friends.

As adults, we speak in stories at work, at family get-togethers, at class reunions, at town meetings, at the post office when we meet our neighbors. In fact, stories are such an important medium for us that even the numerous stories we tell and hear daily are not enough to satisfy our enormous appetites—we consume additional stories by reading novels, seeing movies, and watching dramas on television.

What is the meaning behind telling (and listening to) all of these stories? Obviously, stories *entertain* us, but our need to be entertained doesn't fully account for our great hunger for stories. A more satisfying explanation of the power stories hold for us is that they provide rehearsals for life: they furnish us with the *reassurance* and the *guidance* we need to become adults who live full, happy lives.

Let's see if this idea holds true when we examine a story we all know: Hansel and Gretel. In this story, the children are abandoned by a wicked stepmother and a weak-willed father. The children rescue themselves by killing the witch. In the end, in spite of his initial lapse, their “true” parent (the reformed father) welcomes the children back and promises to protect them against overpowering adult forces (the stepmother and the father's own weaker side).

This chapter will help you to understand the larger context of your writing before you start.

It will also help you to feel confident and comfortable about telling your stories.

This chapter will support you in establishing writing-friendly behaviors and environments that will lead to success.

“I needed to live, but I also needed to record what I lived.”

—Anaïs Nin
diarist



We learn a lot about people by the stories they tell. One person, for instance, is always the butt of her own jokes, while another never tells a story that doesn't illustrate how cleverly he got the better of some poor, unwitting adversary.

Does this story provide reassurance and guidance? It certainly does. The story reassures children that there is always hope of a happy ending no matter how bad things get and that their true parents do love them in spite of their weaknesses. It also reassures children that, although they themselves are weak and vulnerable, they are capable of working out solutions to help themselves. It is Gretel, after all, who pushes the witch into the oven.

Grown-ups tell their stories and listen eagerly to the stories of others for the same reasons. We, too, are looking for order and meaning in the chaos of our lives. When we say, "After the house burned down, she went to pieces. She forgot she had a family to live for," we are telling a story that contains reassurance and guidance about order. We are saying that, in spite of the calamity, this woman could have found comfort and meaning in her relationships. It provides a clear guiding message to both the listener and the speaker: tragedies can either be compounded or overcome—it's up to us to choose.

We read novels or watch movies for the same reason we tell stories: we want both reassurance that we can succeed in this journey called life and the guidance to do so. We want to see and hear how others have been successful in the struggles of their lives. We want to know the meaning of the decisions they took: did finishing school afford them a better job? was putting off marriage a sensible thing to do? what were the consequences of following or deviating from the patterns their families had set for them?

We want stories to reassure us that the inner strength we can muster will be sufficient against self-doubt, loss, grief, and disappointment. (People may exaggerate in their stories not to aggrandize themselves or to boast, but to rehearse the strength and meaning that may be missing in their lives and, by doing so, to acquire the strength and meaning they need.)

It's not out of idle curiosity that your children and grandchildren want to know about you and your life. What is more

natural than for them to turn to the stories of their own parents and family for reassurance and guidance? Your stories have this power and, if they are preserved, they can offer meaning and direction for your children and grandchildren—just as they can for you.

When you tell your personal and family stories, you are filling a need that exists not only in your family but in the larger human community to receive reassurance and guidance. Every year, as more and more once-tightly-knit groups in our society unravel and our access to our rightful inheritance of family stories is threatened, telling and writing your stories becomes increasingly important.

“How can the arts overcome the slow dying of men’s hearts that we call progress?”

—W.B. Yeats
poet

E X E R C I S E

Warm up to writing by recalling stories and recording details.

- Recall a family story you heard when you were a child. This story may be a fragment—in fact, that’s how many family stories are handed down.

- Now, write a list of the details you remember about the story (or fragment). When you make this list, use short sentences, phrases, or even just single words. At this stage, you are not writing a narrative, just making a list. The following might be included: the names of the people in the story; their relationships to each other and to you; what they did for pleasure and work; what the story’s context was (physically—the place and event; spiritually—the ideas and emotions; culturally—the attitudes and the ways of doing things); what the conflict (the action that leads to a crisis) was; and how it was resolved.

- Be as specific as you can with the details you put on your list (“auburn hair braided into a coil”; “a scar from beneath his left nostril to just under his left ear lobe”). Make every effort to remember what people might have worn (“high, lace-collared dresses”), or sayings they might have used (“as dark as the inside of a pocket”), etc.

- Using this list (which should considerably stimulate your memory), generate a rough first draft of the story you wish to write. Since writing is a different medium from speaking, you may feel yourself less fluent in writing than in speaking the story. Don’t let this bother you. It is a natural reaction, and over the long run, the practice of writing will provide you with the fluency you seek.

- Keep this story draft in your three-ring binder. You can develop it into a more polished story later.